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SUBJECT: TURKISH PUBLIC OPINION: WHAT IT MEANS AND WHAT WE
CAN DO ABOUT IT

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: This year's Pew poll confirmed what many already knew -- Turks are angry about US policies. Negative opinion has increased over the past four years, exacerbated by the situation in Iraq and perceived US inaction toward the PKK. Negative Turkish public opinion has gone beyond policy to criticism of American intentions and society, but it is not yet endemic anti-Americanism. Reversing this trend will not be easy or quick. We will pursue a three-pronged effort combining policy advocacy, broader engagement, and practical projects that build on the continued draw of US strengths in science, business and education. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) A LITANY OF NEGATIVE VIEWS: The Pew poll reported that only nine percent of Turks had favorable views of the U.S., three percent less than in 2006 and a 43 percent drop from 2000. This placed Turkey last among the 47 nations surveyed, below even the most critical European nation (Germany, with 30 percent) and Muslim-majority communities (the Palestinian Territories with 13 percent, and Pakistan and Morocco at 15 percent). Eighty-nine percent of the polled Turks said they had little or no confidence in President Bush to do what is right in foreign affairs. Seventy-seven percent worried that the US could become a military threat to Turkey, and 64 percent named the US as the country that poses the greatest threat to Turkey in the future.

¶3. (SBU) Turkish anger toward the US is fuelled by a belief that the United States is at best indifferent or ineffective -- and at worst, working deliberately against Turkey's interests -- on the top two issues of concern to Turkey right now: the PKK and Iraq. Long-standing Turkish hostility to the PKK has been exacerbated this year by renewed PKK violence resulting in further Turkish civilian and military casualties. Turkish contacts across the spectrum of opinion are united in their strong desire for immediate and visible measures against the PKK. They firmly believe that the United States is able but unwilling to take direct action against the PKK, but simultaneously refuses to allow Turkey to take action on its own through a cross-border military operation into northern Iraq.

¶4. (SBU) On Iraq, Turkish public opinion leaders argue that the United States failed to listen to Turkey's advice before 2003 and has now created a serious situation in Iraq which has a direct and negative impact on neighboring Turkey. They believe that the US strategy in Iraq has resulted in greater suffering for the Iraqi people, greater instability in Iraq, and greater potential for a breakup which could lead to the creation of an independent Kurdish nation (something feared by most Turks).

¶5. (SBU) While Turks are particularly critical of the United

States, they have little love for any foreign leader, nation, or entity. In the Pew poll, Turks voiced little or no confidence in leaders ranging from Putin and Merkel (ten percent confidence rating for each) to Osama bin Laden (five percent rating) and Ahmedinejad (21 percent). Only twenty-seven percent of the Turks polled were favorable toward the EU (a 31 percent decrease from 2004) and 23 percent were favorable toward the UN (a 28 percent drop from three years ago). When asked to name Turkey's top three allies, the number one choice (Pakistan) only received 11 percent of the "vote" -- but the US was nowhere on the list.

¶6. (SBU) Negative Turkish public opinion has also expanded beyond policy issues to more critical opinions of Americans and American society. Only 13 percent of Turks polled by Pew are now favorable toward "Americans," and they expressed negative views of "American Ideas About Democracy" (81 percent against) and "American Ways of Doing Business" (83 percent). Eighty-six percent agreed with the statement, "It's bad that American ideas and customs are spreading here." Current Turkish public opinion is not yet equal to endemic, long-lasting anti-Americanism -- many Turkish citizens are voicing their opinions while simultaneously purchasing American products, applying to American universities, and seeking visas to visit the United States. It is also worth noting that U.S.-Turkish relations have recovered from similar low points in past decades. However, if the current trend continues, it could result in a generation of Turks who find it much easier to assume the worst about American policies, priorities and actions.

¶7. (SBU) In response, Mission Turkey proposes the following focus for its FY-08 public diplomacy efforts:

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¶A. (SBU) POLICY ADVOCACY: Policy explication and advocacy will remain an essential component of our public diplomacy efforts, primarily through Turkey-based officers but also involving senior USG officials in Washington and other locations. We will conduct advocacy through a sustained mix of public appearances and statements; television and print media interviews; private group discussions and digital video conferences (DVCs); and outreach efforts to institutions and communities beyond our Mission locations in Ankara, Istanbul, and Adana.

(SBU) PRIORITY REQUEST: Embassy Ankara will launch a monthly series of "Ambassador's Forum" policy-focused DVCs, to bring together State Department officials with Turkish opinion leaders on key topics including U.S. policy in Iraq, Europe, South and Central Asia (particularly Afghanistan and regional energy cooperation issues), the Middle East Peace Process, and Iran. We will seek the support and assistance of EUR, R and other geographic bureaus and posts to ensure USG participation at the appropriate level in these programs.

¶B. (SBU) BROADER ENGAGEMENT: Policy advocacy is critical -- but we cannot succeed only through policy advocacy. In the current environment, programs that strengthen US-Turkish cultural and social ties will be of even greater importance for countering general negative perceptions of America. We will therefore work with our colleagues in Washington and non-governmental partners across the United States to increase our cultural events, youth activities, and programs on economic and social issues of interest to both nations. We will also want to further expand the reach and capacity of US-Turkish academic, professional, and youth exchange programs, including projects designed to bring newly elected Turkish parliamentarians to the United States. Our Consulate General in Istanbul plans to broaden its successful engagement with public schools on the subject of Internet literacy, while Mission outreach programs will include more events involving youth audiences.

(SBU) PRIORITY REQUESTS: We are eager to implement R's

"Pilot Country" initiative in Turkey, as soon as anticipated supplemental funds are made available. We also ask that R expand its valuable summer YEP (Youth Enrichment Program) initiative into a year-round effort in Turkey, that includes programs involving music and other cultural/artistic fields as well as sports and English-language activities. Furthermore, we strongly support initial efforts by R and PD bureaus in Washington to create new USG public diplomacy products and programs which reach out -- directly and effectively -- to the important youth audience in Turkey and other nations, and ask that these efforts be accelerated. Finally, we note the special value of American cultural performers in the current environment, and would welcome enhanced opportunities to program American cultural performances in Turkey.

1C. (SBU) BUILD ON OUR STRENGTHS: Despite the generally negative poll numbers, many Turkish scientists, business entrepreneurs, and students are eager for further engagement with their American counterparts. Mission Turkey will seek to build on this interest in FY-08 through a series of targeted activities in partnership with appropriate American and Turkish private-sector organizations, NGOs, and government departments. These could include a science/innovation fair initiative for Turkish students, in partnership with one or more American hi-tech firms; a program to encourage entrepreneurship in Turkey, developed with American innovation/investment companies; and increased school-to-school partnerships between Turkish and American high schools.

(SBU) PRIORITY REQUESTS: We will discuss these program ideas with American business leaders and organizations in Turkey, but would also appreciate guidance from R and EUR/PPD on US-based public diplomacy partnerships with such groups in these fields.

1D. (SBU) QUICK ACTION FOLLOWING POSITIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENTS: Public diplomacy is a vital component of our diplomatic strategy in Turkey -- but it works best when paired with concrete policy achievements. We will position our public diplomacy staff and capabilities to take immediate advantage of any positive developments related to the issues of primary concern in Turkey -- countering the PKK and improving the situation in Iraq. At the same time, we will stay prepared for the unpleasant alternative -- that the bilateral relationship could get even more challenging in the

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near future due to negative developments related to the PKK, Iraq, or the possible passage of an Armenian Genocide Resolution by the House of Representatives. In that situation, our public diplomacy efforts will focus on minimizing the immediate damage while preserving contacts and activities for future progress.

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